

INNOVATIVE WORK-BASED LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS TRAINING FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Employment has been identified as a critical need for individuals with disabilities (IWDs), given that it is an essential component of quality of adult life (Rogan, Grossi, & Gajewski, 2002). Nevertheless, despite the extensive support by federal legislation, public policy, federal initiatives and programs, the employment outcomes for IWDs are still disappointing and they continue to encounter employment problems such as lower employment rates and lower annual earnings. For example, people with disabilities have experienced significantly lower employment rates than those without a disability. According to findings from the NLTS2 (Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, & Wei, 2011), the approximate rate of employment, at the time of the study, for individuals with disabilities ages 18-24 was 63% and was impacted heavily by the identified disability label and level of training/education. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reports 19.1% of people with disabilities were employed compared to 63.7% of their peers without a disability. Research has shown that long-term career outcomes for individuals with disabilities can drop to a rate as low as 17.2% (Baker, Lowrey, & Wennerlind, 2018). Research on evidence-based practices indicated that early employment experiences, supported internships, and collaboration are effective in preparing and supporting IWDs for their transition to employment (Bellman, Burgstahler, & Ladner, 2014; Lee & Carter, 2012). Longitudinal data demonstrates that schools can improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities through job readiness instruction (Park, Bouck, & Duenas, 2020).

Keywords: Employment, employability, disabilities.

1. Providing work-based learning opportunities

One of the ways that schools can provide employment readiness instruction is through work-based learning (WBL) models. Work-based learning (WBL) is a type of educational approach that integrates classroom instruction with real-world work experience. It is designed to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and practical experience they need to succeed in the workforce. Some common examples of WBL are internships/cooperative education, apprenticeships, and school-based enterprise. These programs can be found in a variety of industries, including healthcare, finance, technology, and manufacturing. Work-based learning is often seen as an effective way to prepare students for careers, as it allows them to gain valuable work experience, develop professional skills, and make connections with potential employers.

2. Offering employability skills instruction

Another way in preparing students with disabilities for employment is to teach high school students with disabilities employability skills. This can be done by offering an elective course that teach basic and essential employability skills. Employability skills refer to generic skills, competencies, knowledge, and personal attributes that enable a person to pursue career success at all levels and types of employment. These skills are not job specific or technical, however, are fundamental to fulfilling all jobs. For students with disabilities, developing employability skills can be particularly important as they may face additional challenges in finding and maintaining employment. By developing employability skills, students with disabilities can become more competitive in the job market, increase their chances of finding and keeping employment, and improve their overall quality of life. For students with disabilities, the following skills are particularly important. (1) Communication: Effective communication skills are critical for success in any job. Individuals with disabilities may need to develop alternative communication strategies or use assistive technology to communicate effectively. (2) Problem-solving: The ability to identify and solve

problems is highly valued in the workplace. Individuals with disabilities may need to be creative in finding solutions that work for them. (3) Time management: The ability to manage time effectively is essential for meeting deadlines and completing tasks. Individuals with disabilities may need to develop strategies to manage their time and energy levels. (4) Teamwork: The ability to work collaboratively with others is important in many jobs. Individuals with disabilities may need to develop communication and social skills to work effectively in a team. (5) Adaptability: The ability to adapt to change and handle unexpected situations is critical in today's fast-paced work environment. Individuals with disabilities may need to be flexible and adaptable to accommodate their needs. (6) Self-advocacy: The ability to self-advocate and communicate their needs is important for individuals with disabilities in the workplace. They may need to educate their colleagues and employers about their disability and the accommodations they require. (7) Technology: In today's digital age, technology skills are essential for many jobs. Individuals with disabilities may need to develop proficiency in using assistive technology to perform their job duties. (8) Positive attitude: A positive attitude and a willingness to learn and improve are highly valued in the workplace. Individuals with disabilities may need to develop resilience and a positive mindset to overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

3. Texas A&M University's projects

TAMU Work-Based Learning Project. The Work-Based Learning Project is a collaborative effort between Texas A&M University and the state-level Vocational Rehabilitation Services. The project aims to provide schools with financial and technical supports to develop new WBL models or enhance existing WBL models that lead to student employment. It offers work-based learning (WBL) opportunities for students and improve teaching practices that lead to employment for high school students with disabilities in Texas. Through a competitive application process, project staff selects high schools to receive training, technical assistance, and funds up to 10,000 U.S. dollars to implement a WBL model that provides job readiness instruction and employment practice. This collaborative effort between Texas A&M University's Center on Disability and Development (CDD) and the state-level Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) increases the number of good-quality WBL models and improves the knowledgebase of schools implementing models across the state. Participants in the project include schools without WBL experience and schools with some experience but want to expand or improve their current model(s). During the application process, project staff provides training opportunities and supports schools in developing a WBL model plan that leads to sustainability and employment outcomes. After schools receive the funds for their WBL model, project staff connects monthly with the schools to identify training and further support needs. The WBL models must include community collaboration, student evaluation, sustainability efforts, and utilizing best-practice pedagogy.

Each year, up to 25 schools with varied WBL experience will benefit from the TAMU Work-Based Learning Project. The schools receive funds, technical support, and training from experts in the field that leads to evidence-based WBL models. Throughout the multi-year project, project staff will collect data on model efficacy, viability within school structures, sustainability, and student employment outcomes. Outcomes include: Increasing the number of schools with WBL models and improving the quality of existing WBL models will strengthen Texas schools' ability to improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. The data gathered from the TAMU Work-Based Learning Project will inform best-practice for schools to create or enhance existing WBL models and inform evidence-based knowledge concerning WBL.

In its first two years, the project has supported the development of 50 work-based learning projects. These projects have included schools in all six TWC service regions and 12 of TEA's 20 regional education service centers. Participating schools serve urban, suburban, and rural areas, as well as low-income, immigrant, and majority-minority districts. Students range from 14 to 22 years-old, including students on 504 plans and IEPs. While most projects are hosted by public schools, one charter school is participating and the project staff continues to reach out to private and charter schools, as well as underserved regions of the state. Projects cover a range of industries. While custom printing and food service remain the most popular sectors, projects have become more diverse during the 2022-2023 school year. The project's training and technical assistance components also build the schools' capacity to develop and implement high-quality, sustainable work-based learning experiences. This allows them to expand and replicate their projects after the initial funding period, enabling them to provide more diverse work experiences and reach a broader range of students. Figure 1 illustrates the types of industry covered by the 50 WBL programs. Feedback from participating schools is overwhelmingly positive, and teachers report building stronger relationships with their VR Counselors, enrolling more students in Summer Earn and Learn and paid work experience, and increased partnerships for parent outreach and Pre-ETS services.

4. Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST) curriculum development

Rationales. Employability skills are important for job search and retention. Ju and colleagues (2012) developed a survey to investigate employers' expectations on employability skills for entry-level employees with and without disabilities. They identified five domains of employability skills, including: Basic Skills, Higher Order Thinking Skills, Basic Work Skills, Social Skills, and Personal Traits that were considered as essential for entry-level employees. These researchers recommend that any efforts toward promoting employment outcomes for people with disabilities should target these basic employability skills. Other research also shows that employers like to hire individuals who have adequate employability skills. On the other hand, inadequate work skills, poor attendance, abusive behaviors, refusal of instructions, tardiness, appearance, and safety issues have led job loss to many individuals with disabilities (Chadsey & Beyer, 2001; Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2001).

Goal. The goal of the project is to develop Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST), an innovative curriculum for employability skills training based on research evidences. The curriculum can be used in Texas high schools for teaching employability skills to high school juniors and seniors who are eligible for pre-ETS services with the potential to gain employment. The curriculum can be a Pre-ETS Elective Course. Some major objectives include: (a) identify from the literature and our own research important employability skills for students with disabilities, (b) identify curriculum components that help students develop employability skills, (c) develop lessons of the Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST), (d) gather feedback from stakeholders and subsequent revisions, (e) field-test the Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST) and subsequent revisions, and (f) finalize the Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST).

The Skills. The BEST curriculum addresses four areas of employability skills, including basic skills (read with understanding and ability to follow instructions), higher order thinking skills (ability to make sound decisions and ability to solve problems), basic work skills (ability to follow schedules and ability to stay with a task until finished), and personal traits (ability to evaluate and monitor own performance and ability to be assertive). The lessons cover specific skills that reflect research findings, required in Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and in Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) list of skills. Figure 2 shows the skills and their relationship to the BEST curriculum, TEKS, and CEC standards.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Schools play an important role in training students with disabilities employability skills to prepare them for gaining and maintaining employment after finishing their education. High schools can take several steps to provide employability skill training to students with disabilities, including:

- (a) provide vocational training programs: Schools can offer vocational training programs that are specifically designed for students with disabilities. These programs can help students acquire skills in various fields and prepare them for future employment.
- (b) collaborate with employers: Schools can collaborate with local employers to create work-based learning opportunities for students with disabilities. These opportunities can provide students with real-world work experience and help them develop employability skills.
- (c) offer internships and job shadowing: Schools can provide students with disabilities the opportunity to participate in internships and job shadowing programs. These programs can help students gain hands-on experience in their desired field and learn about the expectations and responsibilities of the workplace.
- (d) provide individualized support: Schools can provide individualized support to students with disabilities to help them develop employability skills. This support can include assistance with job searching, resume building, interview preparation, and workplace communication.
- (e) create inclusive learning environments: Schools can create inclusive learning environments that foster the development of employability skills for all students, including those with disabilities. This can include the use of universal design for learning, assistive technology, and accommodations to support students' learning needs.

Schools can take several steps to provide work-based learning opportunities to students with disabilities.

1. Collaborate with local businesses: Schools can work with local businesses to create internships, apprenticeships, or job shadowing opportunities for students with disabilities. They can identify businesses that have experience working with individuals with disabilities and are willing to provide work-based learning opportunities.
2. Identify and assess student needs: Schools should identify students with disabilities who may benefit from work-based learning opportunities and assess their needs. This assessment should consider the student's strengths, interests, and career goals.
3. Provide accommodations: Schools should provide accommodations that students with disabilities may need in order to participate in work-based learning opportunities. This could include assistive technology, accessible transportation, or job coaching.
4. Develop individualized learning plans: Schools should work with each student to develop an individualized learning plan that outlines their goals, skills, and the specific work-based learning opportunities they will participate in.
5. Provide training and support: Schools should provide training and support to students with disabilities before they begin work-based learning opportunities. This could include training on workplace safety, social skills, and job-specific skills.
6. Monitor progress and provide feedback: Schools should monitor students' progress during work-based learning opportunities and provide feedback to help them improve their skills and performance.
7. Evaluate the effectiveness of the program: Schools should evaluate the effectiveness of their work-based learning program for students with disabilities. This evaluation should consider the impact on student outcomes, the quality of the work-based learning opportunities, and the satisfaction of both students and employers.

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